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In the Eyes of the Beholders: Understanding Public Perceptions of Dungeons and Dragons and Its Players Using Visual Media

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IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDERS: UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS
OF DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AND ITS PLAYERS USING VISUAL MEDIA

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

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ABSTRACT

Television can have a major impact on how groups of people are seen in shows. The media that people consume have an influence on how they view and interact with the world. Television also utilizes character creation of different types of people to create an array of characters for viewers to enjoy. However, how these characters are portrayed can influence how the public sees the groups that the character is apart of. The “Nerd” subgroup started for form as a subcultural identity in the 1970s and 80s, and as this group began to form, stereotypes about them quickly began to form as well. This paper utilizes visual media representations of Dungeons and Dragons and tracks the changes from the 1980s to the modern day. The subsequent analysis focuses on the gender and sexuality of the Dungeons and Dragons players that are represented to determine the stereotypes about the group and how they change as the nerd identity becomes more formalized.

I dedicate this project first and foremost to every single nerd who has felt discouraged, out of place, lost, hopeless, or left behind by society. It gets better. This project is also dedicated to my professors at Western Kentucky University. Whether you have been involved in this project or not, your hours spent supporting students like me is not in vain.

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Introduction

What would be the first thing that appears in most people's minds when they think of a Dungeons and Dragons player? Maybe they have never heard of the game before, or maybe they think of someone like Steve Urkel, Sheldon Cooper, or Dwight Schrute. All of these are valid responses but most people don't think about people like Drew Barrymore¹, Stephen Colbert², or Vin Diesel³. There is a specific stereotype associated with people who play tabletop roleplaying games, and while some of these assumptions and stereotypes might be true, the tabletop community is a complex one that is truly built for everyone to enjoy. But why do these stereotypes exist? Where did they come from, who perpetuated them, and why does the general public have so many stereotypes surrounding a game that all but died out until around 2015?

The 1980s is a decade that was filled with activism and shifting feelings about different aspects of life. The changing of the tides can be more prominently seen in the events of the Satanic Panic, in which the general public became concerned with the fates of children across

¹ Seth Abramovitch, "Behind Hollywood's Closed Doors, A-List Stars Are Playing Dungeons & Dragons," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/behind-hollywoods-closed-doors-a-912169/>.

² Critical Role. "Stephen Colbert's D&D Adventure with Matthew Mercer (Red Nose Day 2019)." YouTube, May 23, 2019. <https://youtu.be/3658C2y4LLA>.

³ Abramovitch, "Behind Hollywood's Closed Doors"

the United States and began to take action in order to protect them. This included issues such as the rising Rock and Roll scene and the board game, Dungeons and Dragons. Before the Satanic Panic, there was a new rising subgroup amongst teenagers. The “nerd” became popularized as a term, and while it was originally intentioned to mean someone who was a “nut”⁴, it was clear by the 1970s that the term was becoming associated with a new group of teenagers. The nerd identity became fundamentally tied to ideas about deviant sexuality and gender presentation. By analyzing popular film and television representations of Dungeons and Dragons and its players, this new identity, or at least the way it is presented to the public, should become clear on who was considered a “nerd” and what ideas about gender and sexuality are portrayed by this group.

Media has a major role in shaping the way that the public views any group of people, but especially when it comes to fringe groups. Specifically, the creation of the nerd subcultural group. The nerd identity formed in the 1970s and along with its formation, there were specific stereotypes connected to a nerd's gender and their sexuality. While this is most often viewed in terms of the news media, entertainment also plays a major part in this. Dungeons and Dragons has been used across the entertainment industry as a snippet of a scene, an episode, or a major plot point in all types of action and fantasy shows, including Disney’s Gravity Falls, Steven Spielberg’s E.T. The Extra Terrestrial, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. All of these shows and movies play a part in influencing who the public views as Dungeons and Dragons player, but actors are casted for roles because they fit specific specifications about a character. The “nerd” stereotype is often used in television and, until the turn of the century and into the 2010s, was

⁴ Nerd is potentially a derivative of the word “nert” which was originally derived from the term nutcase.

viewed as an outsider identity. By using visual media, it will become clear that there have been assigned norms to this identity since its conception and the perceptions and norms surrounding this group have varied over several decades.

Background and Literature

This paper is an analysis of both movies and television to understand the subcultural identity that is developed with Dungeons and Dragons. By following Dungeons and Dragons and its representation in visual media, there will be clear signs about who the public views as a Dungeons and Dragons player, what they are like, and how they act. Understanding this identity will allow for a better understanding of how the subcultural group has developed since the Satanic Panic and can shed light onto how other groups who experience a moral panic might progress after the panic recedes. This understanding will also allow for a deeper understanding of the gender presentation and assumed sexuality of those who were classified as Dungeons and Dragons players. The focus on more popular media will provide an understanding of how a broader public views the players of the game. The goal of this research is to follow a specific web that has been underexplored in the current literature. Before moving forward, it is critical to understand both the Satanic Panic and Dungeons and Dragons as a game.

The current work is far from the only attempt to understand Dungeons and Dragons and its place in the Satanic Panic and broader history. The book *Dangerous Games* by Joseph Laycock goes into a detailed description of Dungeons and Dragons and its association with the Satanic Panic. Laycock also goes into detail about the history surrounding Patrica Pulling, her organization, and her aims. This book widely seems to be the first major work on the subject, and as such is cited broadly across newer literature

on the subject. This book was originally published in 2015, denoting that the overall exploration of this topic is new. Laycock does an incredibly comprehensive analysis of Dungeons and Dragons and its place in the Satanic Panic. This source is used as a way to situate the game in a broader historical context. However, this paper engages less with the game itself and more with the players and the identities that they are aligned with as a result of playing the game. Laycock allows for the positioning of Dungeons and Dragons in a historical context, whereas other sources analyze the games tie to the Satanic Panic and the factors that led to such a connection.

Misguided Paladins: A Sympathetic Investigation of Cultural Factors That Gave Support to the Factually Inaccurate Campaign Against Dungeons and Dragons by Elias Gannage with Patrick Henry College is an undergraduate thesis project that analyzes the Satanic Panic itself and the culture of the 1980s in order to better understand the nuances surrounding the creation of organizations like B.A.D.D.. This paper also aimed at understanding how the movement moved from something that only the highly religious were concerned about into a broader movement. Gannage argues that this was not a result of highly Christian parents, but instead a group of people who were reacting to the circumstances that they were surrounded in. This work also provides historical context and with its publication in July of 2020, the recency of this research proves useful in the overall understanding of the Panic in a modern lens. This paper fails to critically engage with gender and sexuality as well. While it is used to understand the motivations to ban Dungeons and Dragons in the Satanic Panic, Gannage also fails to address the players themselves and the identity that was assigned to them. There is one major source that does work to engage with media portrayals of Dungeons and Dragons.

Demons and Demonization: Filming the Anti-Dungeons and Dragons Hysteria is an article that was published in Luma Quarterly in Winter of 2021. The article was written by Murray Leeder, and throughout the course of this article, Leeder is analyzing movies that were released in the 1980s that specifically focused on Dungeons and Dragons. While the concept is similar to that of this paper, it differs in a few key ways. Firstly, this article focuses specifically on the two movies that were focused on Dungeons and Dragons in the 1980s, *Mazes and Monsters* and *Skullduggery*. Secondly, the article focuses more on centering the movies in the time period where they were created rather than working to understand the creation of a subcultural identity. This article is a fantastic work in using the media that was released to understand the fears of the time; however, it has little relevance outside of the Satanic Panic period that it analyzed. This article also fails to analyze gender and sexuality and the way that perceptions of Dungeons and Dragons players is correlated with these two concepts. *Demons and Demonization* looks at media pieces, where *The Roleplaying Society* combines academia and Dungeons and Dragons.

The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs is a book that looks to combine both academia and roleplaying games. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco published the book in 2016. The essays within this book are disjointed and attempt to provide an overall interdisciplinary view of Dungeons and Dragons. The book is focused on the broad implications of the game rather than its immediate or long term impact on individuals. The essays in this book are heavily focused on using Dungeons and Dragons as an educational tool rather than situating Dungeons and Dragons within culture overall. This book differs from the following paper because,

while it claims to present Dungeons and Dragons in the overall popular culture light, it focuses heavily on education and fails to create a comprehensive understanding of Dungeons and Dragons in the public eye. This paper works not only to understand Dungeons and Dragons and how it is used in popular media, but also to look at the cultural identity that forms around the game and how its players are portrayed in relation to their gender and sexuality. Works surrounding or utilizing Dungeons and Dragons also focus on how to use the game in a community building setting.

The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity by Sarah Bowman is the last work in this review. This book works to understand identity and how Dungeons and Dragons can be used as a community building tool, a way to help in solving complex problems, and aid in overall identity expression. There are no claims being made about the importance or lack thereof about RPGS throughout this paper. Regardless of their importance in any aspect, these games have been used in media and have become an important piece of culture for specific subgroups. How is this paper different from what has already been done? Most notably, none of the major prior works analyze past the Satanic Panic. The ones that focus on Dungeons and Dragons in a modern context do not do so in a historically directed way. Additionally, none of these sources critically engage with gender and sexuality as it relates to the game. What is the discourse surrounding gender and sexuality in the late twentieth century and what does that reveal about perceptions of Dungeons and Dragons players?

Gender and sexuality are constructs that have a nearly omnipresent effect on a person's day to day life. During the 1980s, there was a complex discourse surrounding

gender and sexuality which can be seen through the Satanic Panic. Understanding the gender norms that were forming at the time will be critical for the following analysis. During the Cold War, the United States was focused on being everything the Soviets were not, especially as it came to religious distinctions.⁵ Where the Soviet Union was perceived as completely atheist and devoid of religion, the United States and the rest of the Western world rooted itself in Christianity and Judeo-Christian values.⁶ The pull towards Christianity in many of these Western nations had a fundamental impact on the gender roles and formation of identities at the time.

The formation of gender identity and the shifting of gender roles requires the context of the era. In “Sexuality and the Nation-State” by Sabine Frühstück, she claims that after colonization, sexuality was not understood through the beliefs of a larger group, but instead through scientific study, and that these norms were no longer being set by local communities but by government agencies.⁷ Frühstück continues on to explain sexuality and its shift in the United States. “Concerns about non-normative sexualities, especially homosexuality, became especially acute in the latter half of the nineteenth century as fears about sexual deviance previously confined for the most part to the private sphere began to enter public discourse and public policy”.⁸ This leads into the analysis of this essay. The Dungeons and Dragons players, and later those who identify with the “nerd” subcultural group, were assigned a specific identity based on the perceptions of their gender and sexual conformity.

⁵ Joan Wallach-Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), 123.

⁶ Wallach-Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 123-125.

⁷ Sabine Frühstück, “Sexuality and the Nation-State”, in *A Global History of Sexuality: The Modern Era*, edited by Robert M. Buffington, Eithne Luibheid, and Donna J. Guy, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 32

⁸ Frühstück, “Sexuality and the Nation-State”, 34.

The Dungeons and Dragons player and later the “nerd” archetype are assumed to be, in some ways, deviant from traditional roles of masculinity. This moral movement back towards Judeo-Christian ideals suggests that there is something innately unmasculine about playing a game like Dungeons and Dragons. Instead of fully exercising masculine potential, Dungeons and Dragons allegedly dampens one's masculinity and social development. Instead of socializing with a larger group of peers, Dungeons and Dragons appeared isolating, with young boys playing typically with the same group of friends and embarking on several campaigns together. This sense of deviance from the norms is clear in the media surrounding Dungeons and Dragons, especially the media that was being released during the Satanic Panic.

The Satanic Panic was a moral panic that took place in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. It is called this because many accusations were raised claiming that a variety of different things were leading children to Satanism. In order to understand this, a clear definition of what a moral panic is must be laid out. According to sociologist Stanley Cohen, a moral panic is

a condition, episode, person, or group of persons that emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or

(more often) resorted to, the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.⁹

The Satanic Panic targeted a variety of different topics, such as heavy metal music, daycare centers, and Dungeons and Dragons.¹⁰ All of these topics, while varied, have one major thing in common. They are aiming to protect children.

Particularly, the Satanic Panic seemed to aim at protecting children who fell into a particular outsider stereotype. The children who were seen as countercultural and who were not participating in activities that would be considered normal for children their age to be participating in. Instead of being a member of the football team, the children who were targeted during this movement were interested in classwork, or rock and roll music, or television. These interests seemingly did not align with the majority of their peers, and as such, they were assigned an outsider identity. The identity forms in the 1970s, which notably coincides with the creation and rapid growth of the tabletop roleplaying game, Dungeons and Dragons. High school students are aware of the crowd that their peers are associated with and the prestige that brings.¹¹ Jocks, Preppies, and Populars carried the most prestige and power, where the Freaks, Goths, Losers, Druggies, and Nerds were all at the bottom of the social hierarchy.¹² Those who fell into the bottom of the social hierarchy were the ones that the Satanic Panic were at the bottom of this social hierarchy.

⁹ Austin Wilson, *Demons & Devils: The Moral Panic Surrounding Dungeons & Dragons, 1979-1991*, (University of Kansas: Lawrence, KS, 2019), 2.

¹⁰ Michael Hobbes and Sarah Marshall, hosts, "The Satanic Panic" You're Wrong About (podcast), May 2, 2018, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1112270/3884114-the-satanic-panic>

¹¹ John H. Bishop, et. al, "Nerds and Freaks: A Theory of Student Culture and Norms" *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, no. 6 (2003), 148.

¹² Bishop et. al, "Nerds and Freaks", 148.

Dungeons and Dragons is a tabletop roleplaying game that is typically set in a fantasy setting.¹³ The game is typically played with 4-6 players, one of which is called the Dungeon Master or the Game Master, and this player is the one who tells the story laid out in the game.¹⁴ Dungeons and Dragons was initially released in 1974 by creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson who were both fans of tactical war games, such as Maze and Space Raiders.¹⁵ Dungeons and Dragons was initially based on the war games that had gained popularity.¹⁶ The war games were initially used as a way to simulate war at a tactical, or strategic scenario during war times; however, over time, these games became more complex as players created scenarios that more accurately depicted the complexities of real life.¹⁷ Gygax and Arneson were both fans of these types of games and Gygax had previously developed a game that was similar to a war game called Chainmail, which operated like many war games of the past, but it was based in a medieval setting rather than the modernized one.¹⁸ What was popularizing Dungeons and Dragons and drawing boys in to play a game that was mostly sitting around and doing math?

The game allowed for boys who may have already experienced social troubles to spend time with the friends that they did have. In the two suicide cases in which Dungeons and Dragons was in part blamed, both boys were struggling socially. James Dallas Egbert was an incredibly intelligent teen who started going to college at 16 and

¹³ “What Is D&D: Dungeons & Dragons,” D&D Official | Dungeons & Dragons, Wizards of the Coast, <https://dnd.wizards.com/start-playing-dnd>.

¹⁴ “What Is D&D: Dungeons & Dragons.”

¹⁵ Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), ix.

¹⁶ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 32.

¹⁷ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 32.

¹⁸ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 37.

was struggling to make social connections there like he had with others his age. Bink Pulling was playing the game at school with his teacher and a few other students in his class. There has not been much recorded on Bink's social life at school outside of what has already been described. However, it is clear that this game, much like fantasy books and rock and roll music, gave teenagers who wanted an escape a way to do so.

The story behind Dungeons and Dragons involvement in the Satanic Panic is a tragic one that involves teen suicide and grieving parents trying to find an explanation for their sons deaths. The first of these suicides started as a missing persons case that rose to national attention. In 1979, James Dallas Egbert III disappeared from Michigan State University's campus.¹⁹ Egbert was a child prodigy who had entered the University at the age of 16.²⁰ He was a fan of science fiction and Dungeons and Dragons, and on August 15, 1979, he left a suicide note. This note included information about pressures from school, potential drug use, and a kid who was struggling to come to terms with his sexuality.²¹ Despite this, his body was not found.²² This incited a search for Egbert that was led by private investigator, William Dear.²³ Using various clues including push pins on the corkboard of Egbert's room, Dear deduced that Egbert had disappeared into the

¹⁹ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 77.

²⁰ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 77.

²¹ Troy Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons: The James Dallas Egbert III Story," *The Saturday Evening Post*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2019/09/disappearances-dragons-the-james-dallas-egbert-iii-story/>.

²² Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

²³ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

steam tunnels under the school.²⁴ Evidence suggested that he had been there before and was potentially going to take his life, but he was not found in that location.²⁵

This case related Dungeons and Dragons to the Satanic Panic because of Dear's theories about what had happened to Egbert. While he kept most of the information disclosed from the media, he did share the theory that the boy might have gone missing in the tunnels while playing a live action version of Dungeons and Dragons.²⁶ This theory was discussed amongst several news outlets, many of which suggested that Egbert believed that he had become his character.²⁷²⁸ This was a misunderstanding of the game; however, this is the piece of information that the media focused on. By September, Egbert called Dear himself, which led the investigation to Egbert's uncle's house, where he was retrieved.²⁹ He did attempt to commit suicide in August by overdosing on sleeping pills but the attempt was unsuccessful, so he sought the help of his uncle.³⁰ In a later interview with William Dear, James Dallas Egbert said that his suicide attempts were driven by pressures from his parents and academics along with his drug use, and it was not tied to his gaming.³¹

The James Dallas Egbert case is a tragic one that ended in a suicide a year and one day after he had entered the tunnels in Michigan State.³² Despite his parents never

²⁴ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

²⁵ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

²⁶ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

²⁷ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

²⁸ "Fantasy Game May Have Claimed Missing Genius," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Sep 7, 1979.

²⁹ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

³⁰ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

³¹ Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

³² Brownfield, "Disappearances & Dragons"

blaming gaming for their son's death, that did not stop the rest of the country from becoming involved in their son's disappearance and eventual death. This case inspired a movie to be created surrounding the case, titled *Mazes and Monsters*, that will be discussed later in this paper. Egbert was not the only suicide to be misattributed to Dungeons and Dragons. Another suicide, that occurred several years later, inspired one parent to create an organization that protested Dungeons and Dragons and created most of the Satanic ties to the game that are remembered today.

Irving Lee "Bink" Pulling was sixteen in June of 1982, which is the same month that he decided to take his life with a pistol.³³ When his mother, Patricia "Pat" Pulling found her son dead, she began to search for answers about why he might have taken his own life.³⁴ When the police department searched Pulling's room, they were greeted with Dungeons and Dragons paraphernalia, including a magazine and a bizarre note that was assumed to be a suicide note that contained mystical phrases that were assumed to be connected to the game.³⁵ Irving Pulling had been exposed to Dungeons and Dragons at school, playing some of the game with several students and a teacher, who acted as the "Dungeon Master" (DM) who had placed a curse on him in a game earlier that day.³⁶ Because of the games tie to the school and the assumed tie between the game and her son's death, Patricia Pulling started an organization to petition against having the game in

³³ Michael A Stackpole, "The Pulling Report," Michael A. Stackpole: The Pulling Report, January 1, 1990, http://www.rpgstudies.net/stackpole/pulling_report.html#2.

³⁴ Stackpole, "The Pulling Report".

³⁵ Elias Gannage, "Misguided Paladins: A Sympathetic Investigation of Cultural Factors That Gave Support to the Factually Inaccurate Campaign Against Dungeons & Dragons," (Patrick Henry College, 2020).

³⁶ Stackpole, "The Pulling Report".

school or in libraries, and attempted to get parental warnings placed onto the games box.³⁷

While most of the efforts made by Pat Pulling were unsuccessful at the governmental level, the ideas that she was a leader in spreading had a much greater and longer lasting impact. The idea that Dungeons and Dragons or other tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGS) are dangerous or could have a profound impact on impressionable minds lasted longer than just through the Satanic Panic.³⁸ What is arguably more impactful is the impact that people like Patricia Pulling had on who the public saw as vulnerable to this type of corruption. Ideas of who is at risk of falling into the dangerous world of Dungeons and Dragons was not just a discussed idea, but one that was reflected in entertainment and media at the time. Throughout this paper, various forms of visual media will be analyzed in order to determine who the general public thought a “dungeons and dragons” player was and what that says about the stereotypes of these “types” of people. This is especially relevant in terms of their gender and sexuality

³⁷ Michael Isikoff, “Parents Sue School Principal,” *The Washington Post*, August 13, 1983.

³⁸ “The Great 1980s Dungeons & Dragons Panic” *BBC*, April 11, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26328105>.

The Decade of Decadence: 1980-1989

The 1980s is a decade that many of the modern day remember fondly. Filled with a prosperous economy, the war on drugs, the HIV epidemic spreading across national borders to wreak havoc worldwide, and accusations of Satanism, how could one not remember this as a wonderful time to be alive? Dungeons and Dragons was still a fairly new game in 1980, with the game just truly getting its start in the late 70s. However, that did not stop the game from its bad reputation early in its existence. The first major piece of media that flirted with the idea of mentioning Dungeons and Dragons was a book published in 1981 by Rona Jaffe that was quickly turned into a direct to TV movie. This movie kept the book's title: *Mazes and Monsters*.

As previously mentioned, *Mazes and Monsters* closely follows the reported facts from the James Dallas Egbert III case. This movie follows Robbie Wheeling, played by then sitcom actor Tom Hanks, as he gets involved with several students who play their favorite game, *Mazes and Monsters*.³⁹ At the beginning of the film, Robbie's parents warn him to stop playing the game because he's mind will get stuck in the game and he initially does heed their warnings.⁴⁰ However, after some convincing from three of his peers, one of which he has a crush on, he begins to play the game again.⁴¹ Much like the disappearance case, these students take the game into real life by playing in the cave

³⁹ *Mazes and Monsters*, directed by Steven Hillard Stern (McDermott Productions Procter & Gamble Productions, 1982) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HfU0UjcCeE>

⁴⁰ *Mazes and Monsters*.

⁴¹ *Mazes and Monsters*.

system near their school.⁴² During one of these live action role playing sessions, Robbie gets scared and imagines that there is an actual monster from the game attacking him.⁴³ After this attack, he is seemingly lost in the mindset of his character. This change has various effects on his personality and overall well being.⁴⁴

The first sign of change begins with Robbie only going by his character's name and taking on the character's personality.⁴⁵ As a response to this, he breaks up with his then girlfriend, who was also a Mazes and Monsters player, because he is a devout saint and must keep chastity.⁴⁶ Shortly after this, he goes on his quest to find the Great Hall, who is an imagined figure of his older brother who had disappeared previously. In order to find and join the “Great Hall”, Robbie must go to the “Two Towers”, which is later discovered to be the World Trade Center, and jump off while casting a flying spell so he can join the Great Hall.⁴⁷ At the end of the movie, Robbie’s friends visit his parents estate where they discover that he is still lost in the game.⁴⁸ They play one last game with him, but the movie makes it clear that Robbie is never going to make a recovery.⁴⁹

This plotline is intermingled with several other budding fears about Dungeons and Dragons of the time. One of Robbie’s friends, Jay-Jay, intends to commit suicide early in the movie, which leads him to killing off his character in the game and convincing the others to join him in the tunnels for the live actions sessions, presumably so someone will

⁴² *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴³ *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴⁴ *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴⁵ *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴⁶ *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴⁷ *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴⁸ *Mazes and Monsters.*

⁴⁹ *Mazes and Monsters.*

find his body.⁵⁰ This is intrinsically tied to the idea that Dungeons and Dragons, or in this case Mazes and Monsters, can push young people towards committing suicide. While there is now little proven psychological evidence to support this theory, this is a theory that prevailed in many circles during the era. One of the most prominent groups who was pushing this type of idea was the group founded by Bink Pullings mother, Patricia Pulling. Pulling founded the group “Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons” (BADD), who made it their mission to ensure these games were kept out of the hands of children.⁵¹

BADD was founded less than a year after Bink’s death in 1982.⁵² His mother, suffering through the grief of losing a son to suicide, founded this group to try and stop other mothers and children from suffering the same fate. By using both religious and secular arguments, Pulling and the other members of BADD led the campaign against Dungeons and Dragons, trying to help parents protect their children from the risks of being involved with Satanism, losing their children to being lost psychologically in the game, and the risk that their children would commit suicide because of the game.⁵³ The organization was forced after a court dismissed Patricia Pulling’s lawsuit against her son’s principal and TSR, the company that owned Dungeons and Dragons at the time.⁵⁴ She partnered with Thomas Radecki, the director of the National Coalition on Television Violence and together these two worked to influence schools, churches, and police stations across the United States.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *Mazes and Monsters*.

⁵¹ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 51.

⁵² Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 51.

⁵³ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 51.

⁵⁴ Isikoff, “Parents Sue School Principal,”

⁵⁵ Gannage, “Misguided Paladins”, 22.

This group worked to ensure that Dungeons and Dragons would not have a growing player base and that children across the nation would be safe. To do this, BADD worked to lobby members of the Federal Trade Commission and members of Congress in order to require warning labels that would link Dungeons and Dragons to suicide.⁵⁶ This effort proved to be unsuccessful; however, that does not mean that it did not have any impact on the public's view of the game. Patricia Pulling appeared on television, even getting a spot on 60 Minutes to raise awareness about the alleged impact of the game.⁵⁷ Pulling claimed that she was an expert on the occult, despite having no formal training on the issue and led police seminars that linked Dungeons and Dragons to the rising concerns about cult crimes, teenage suicide, and the Satanic Ritual Abuse that was popularized through Michelle Remembers.⁵⁸

Despite her lack of credentials, many believed the claims that she made about the game. BADD worked to combine both religious and secular fears about Dungeons and Dragons into something that parents across the United States could be afraid of. Pulling had no real need to be an occult expert despite the fact that that is how she branded herself.⁵⁹ She was a mother who was angry, scared, grieving, and wanted justice for her son. This was something that the public could relate to. Parents cared about their kids, and the fear of losing their kids to a game that, at least by Pulling's claims, drove her son to commit suicide, was enough to attach a stigma to a game that otherwise had done little to nothing in terms of the issues it was being tied to.⁶⁰ Pulling's use of rhetoric greatly

⁵⁶ Gannage, "Misguided Paladins", 22.

⁵⁷ Gannage, "Misguided Paladins", 22.

⁵⁸ Gannage, "Misguided Paladins", 22.

⁵⁹ Gannage, "Misguided Paladins", 23.

⁶⁰ Gannage, "Misguided Paladins", 23.

assisted her fight against the game, but her tactics were not as successful on the governmental front.

There were several groups that were actively trying to lobby the government for parental warning labels on things that were deemed unsafe for children. The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) was working around the same time, but instead of their target being TTRPGS, they were targeting heavy metal music and other forms of music that was seen as dangerous to children.⁶¹ Where the PMRC had much more success in getting parental warning labels put onto music, BADD was much less successful in their governmental aspirations. Despite the group's attempts, there was no success made in trying to get warning or parental guidance labels placed onto TTRPGs by the FCC. Regardless, the cultural shift in broad thoughts about the public perceptions changed the course of public thought surrounding the games for the remainder of the 20th century.

The narrative that Pulling and her compatriots shared about Dungeons and Dragons was able to convince the public about the dangers. The message that BADD pushed was composed of both secular and religious elements, including fears about psychological issues that could be caused from the game, which were similar to the fears that arose from the James Dallas Egbert III case. However, Mazes and Monsters was not the work of visual media that mentioned Dungeons and Dragons or depicted those as players. Dungeons and Dragons was also depicted in the highest grossing film of the 1980s, E.T. - The Extra Terrestrial.

E.T. is not a movie that typically needs a detailed introduction. Within the movie, an alien becomes stranded on earth and befriends Elliott Taylor, who is known as a

⁶¹ Gannage, "Misguided Paladins", 20.

troubled kid.⁶² Elliot then aids the alien in getting back to its home planet in the film.⁶³ Unlike *Mazes and Monsters*, this is not a film in which *Dungeons and Dragons* is the center focus. However, early in the movie, there is a scene that features the game. In this minute and a half long scene, a group of older boys are gathered around a table playing the game while deciding what they should order on their pizza.⁶⁴ The boys begin to argue about whether they should cast a resurrection spell while Elliot asks if he can play the game.⁶⁵ He asks his older brother before he responds with “You have to ask Steve. He’s the Game Master, he has absolute power”.⁶⁶ This scene, while short, is critical for the movie because it is at the end of this scene where Elliot meets the Extra Terrestrial.

Dungeons and Dragons is not mentioned by name in this scene, but there are several context clues that could allow those who know about the game to know what the boys at the table are playing. In addition to the mentioning of Steve being the game master, one of the boys explains to the mother in the scene that there is no winning in the game just like there is no winning in life.⁶⁷ There are also several allusions towards the game's mechanics in the scene, such as rolling dice, spell casting, the map that is laid out on the table, and a classic resurrection spell.⁶⁸ Additionally, Steven Speilberg, the director of *E.T.*, had the children of the cast play a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* together as a

⁶² “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial,” IMDb, June 11, 1982, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083866/>.

⁶³ “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial,”

⁶⁴ “Dungeons & Dragons Played in ‘E.t.: The Extra-Terrestrial’ (1982),” YouTube, August 19, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hJdhL1Ni_w.

⁶⁵ “Dungeons & Dragons Played in ‘E.t.: The Extra-Terrestrial’”

⁶⁶ “Dungeons & Dragons Played in ‘E.t.: The Extra-Terrestrial’”

⁶⁷ “Dungeons & Dragons Played in ‘E.t.: The Extra-Terrestrial’”

⁶⁸ “Dungeons & Dragons Played in ‘E.t.: The Extra-Terrestrial’”

part of the audition process.⁶⁹ One of the actors had played the game before, so the game was used as a way to observe the cast dynamics to ensure that they would work well together on screen.⁷⁰

The depiction of Dungeons and Dragons in E.T. varies drastically from the depiction of the game in Mazes and Monsters. These differences could be assumed to be a major difference in the movie's time of release; however, E.T. was released in June of 1982, while Mazes and Monsters was released in December of the same year. These two movies have a vastly different depiction of the game but both were released in the same year. This is, in part, due to the messages that were being pushed by both directors. Mazes and Monsters was created to be a cautionary tale to prevent children from going towards the same path of James Dallas Egbert III.⁷¹ The movie was created to be a tragedy, and it was made to show people that there are dangers that could hurt your children if they decide to play the game. This is in direct contrast to the rather harmless game that is played in E.T., where the children are sitting around the table and playing a game harmlessly. In E.T, there are no negative consequences to playing the game but it is just a game that boys are playing while discussing what they are going to order on their pizza.

The actors that are casted in both of these movies speak on what the stereotypes surrounding the players of the Dungeons and Dragons were in the 1980s. In both films,

⁶⁹ “Robert Macnaughton”, *Orange Coast Magazine*, April 1986, 85.

⁷⁰ Gwynne Watkins, “‘E.T.’ at 35: Older Bro Robert Macnaughton Tells What ‘D&d’ at Harrison Ford’s, ‘Weird al,’ Elvis Costello Had to Do with It,” Yahoo!, August 11, 2017, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/e-t-35-older-bro-robert-macnaughton-tells-d-harrison-fords-weird-al-elvis-costello-202826034.html>.

⁷¹ Dan Jolin, “The Real-Life Tragedy and Sensationalised Fantasy behind D&D-Inspired Movie Mazes and Monsters,” *Dicebreaker*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/feature/mazes-and-monsters-reality-fantasy>.

all of the actors were white and a majority of them were male. Amongst the two casts, there was only one woman depicted. Kate, as depicted by Wendy Crewson, was a college student and the love interest of Robbie Wheeling in the movie.⁷² She was one of the three people who convinced Robbie, played by Tom Hanks, to rejoin the game; however, much of her character development is centered around Robbie and his involvement in the game. The actors who played in the movie all fit the classic nerd stereotype. Looking at the nerds that were depicted in popular teen movies at the time, such as *Pretty in Pink*'s Ducky and the *Breakfast Club*'s Brian, all of the characters of *Mazes and Monsters* fit the same stereotype.⁷³ The same follows for the boys around the table in the scene of *E.T.* While these two movies show incredibly contrasting views of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the representation surrounding the movie dies out in the coming decade.

During the 1980s, *Dungeons and Dragons* gained a stigma that has loosened through the coming decades. While there are still those who believe that his game is demonic, much of the stigma that was put onto the game has now faded. The outrage surrounding the game speaks volumes not only about who is playing the game and what stereotypes exist there, but also who needs to be protected in society. Throughout these movies, we consistently see young people, specifically young white boys. This can be seen through the news that the public latched onto in the stories of James Dallas Egbert III and Bink Pulling. This can also be seen through who was casted as the main characters in these films, with all but one of the main cast in *Mazes and Monsters* being young boys and all of the people cast in *E.T.* were young boys. This makes a powerful

⁷² *Mazes and Monsters*.

⁷³ Donielle Flynn, "8 Nerdalicious 80's School Movies - 94.7 WCSX," 94.7 WCSX Detroit's Classic Rock, June 13, 2022, <https://wcsx.com/listicle/8-nerdalicious-80s-school-movies/>.

statement about who society is trying to protect from Dungeons and Dragons, even in the stories that are not warning signs against the game.

The End of the Millenium: 1990-1999

The 1990s saw the end of the Cold War and an accelerated rise in technology and globalization. With the rise of technology truly signaling a new era, it was hard for the world to not be so intrinsically connected. This was a decade that became increasingly connected not only to each other and other parts of the United States, but to the global world. There was no clear end of the Satanic Panic; however, much of the fear seemed to have dissipated by the early 90s. This does not mean that there is any lack of representation of Dungeons and Dragons players, though. While not mentioned by name in many movies or television shows, there is one movie that is a 90s classic that features some of the signifiers of Dungeons and Dragons.

Jumanji came out in 1995 and features Robin Williams, Kirsten Dunst, and Bonnie Hunt.⁷⁴ In the movie, a young Alan Parrish finds a board game that has been long buried in his town. He brings the game home to play with a girl named Sarah before discovering that the game comes to life.⁷⁵ After several turns, Alan Parrish gets literally sucked into the game and has to stay in the game until there is a 5 or an 8 rolled.⁷⁶ It takes another twenty six years before Parrish is released from the game by two children who discover the game in the attic of the house their parents have just bought.⁷⁷ The game is played through, with various different life threatening events occurring until the game is

⁷⁴ “Jumanji,” IMDb, December 15, 1995, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113497/>.

⁷⁵ *Jumanji*, directed by Joe Johnson (1995; TriStar Pictures).

⁷⁶ *Jumanji*.

⁷⁷ *Jumanji*.

finally completed.⁷⁸ In this movie, instead of children deciding to live action roleplay their favorite game in a cave, the game itself literally is described and comes to life. While this movie might not directly mention Dungeons and Dragons, there is little doubt that it is intrinsically tied to it.

The movie does not directly mention Dungeons and Dragons; however, that does not mean that this does not provide some insight into who was playing these types of games at the time. Jumanji itself is not a roleplaying game, but the describing of actions as they come to life is an aspect that can be tied back into the roleplaying aspect of TTRPGs. Because of the tie to this role playing aspect of Dungeons and Dragons, Jumanji will be used as the primary media representation for the period. There are a few other representations of the game, but much of the game had nearly faded into obscurity by the 1990s.

The difference between the Jumanji, as it is the closest major media representation there is for Dungeons and Dragons at the time, and the movies of the 1980s is the message that it sends. Jumanji is not made to be a warning to parents and their children. The movie is made to be a comedy. Robin Williams being casted as the main character is not done because he looks like a young white kid who could be tricked into joining a Satanic cult or his mind would get stuck in the game. He was a comedian who was known for playing funny characters in films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam*.⁷⁹ Jumanji is not the same warning to parents and children that *Mazes and Monsters* was. Instead, role playing games, which might have a

⁷⁸ *Jumanji*.

⁷⁹ "Robin Williams Credits", IMBd, accessed January 7, 2024, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000245/>

certain dangerous element to them because there was always the risk of getting literally stuck in the game, could be considered humorous by this point in history.

Jumanji allowed for a more humorous version of TTRPGs. The portrayal of role playing games as something that can be humorous, despite the lack of actual ties to Dungeons and Dragons itself shows the evolution of the game in the minds of the general public. Instead of Jumanji being portrayed as a warning towards people, it was funny. The game was coming to life and it was scary but it was not any real threat. Instead, there was a young boy who had been released from the game and was looking to find his parents. This shift in perspective marks a certain turning point in Dungeons and Dragons history where these types of games could be written off humorously. However, the people who are chosen to play the characters in this movie can still speak volumes about the fears and stereotypes that were still lingering.

The main cast of Jumanji were all white. This cast consisted of Adam Hann-Byrd playing the young Alan Parrish, Robin Williams playing the aged version of Alan Parrish, Jirsten Dunst playing Judy Shepherd and Bonnie Hunt playing Sarah Whittle.⁸⁰ In this movie, the primary cast is made up of preteens and teenagers who are playing this game.⁸¹ Much like the casting seen in the 1980s, this is a massive denoter of who is playing these types of games. This specific stereotype, at least according to the media that is representing them, has not changed. If anything, the age range has gotten younger. In *Mazes and Monsters*, the group is composed of college students who are not heeding the warnings of their parents. However, in *E.T.*, the boys appear to be in junior high or high

⁸⁰ "Robin Williams Credits"

⁸¹ "Robin Williams Credits"

school, though this is never directly stated. The ages of these people matter because it is an indicator of not only who is playing the game, but who society deems as the stereotypical player. Thus far, the type of person is clear.

Through the telling of *Jumanji*, *Mazes and Monsters*, and *E.T.*, there are several characteristics that make up the stereotype of a Dungeons and Dragons player. The first of these is that Dungeons and Dragons players, or at least the ones that need to be warned against the game, are white. The second of these is that the players are young. These two categories can fit every single main character who has been depicted playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons game or a Dungeons and Dragons equivalent. These characters are mostly awkward in their demeanor as well, with those in *Mazes and Monsters* being depicted as losers, loners, or the nerdy type. This is also seen in *Jumanji*. Alan Parrish is bullied within the first several minutes of the movie. These signify that there is a consistent theme of being outside of the in groups that is persistent about Dungeons and Dragons players throughout this twenty year time frame. This is not the only consistency amongst Dungeons and Dragons players as seen throughout these films.

The majority of the actors that have been casted for Dungeons and Dragons players have been male. With the exception of Kate in *Mazes and Monsters*, all of the actors that have been explicitly stated to play Dungeons and Dragons have been male. This creates a framework for who a Dungeons and Dragon player is in the 1980s and 1990s. The image of a young, white, nerdy boy is the image that is being presented as a Dungeons and Dragons player. This is likely in part because those who made up a large portion of the player base in this timeframe. However, this image cannot be left up solely to the player base itself. This is also the image that was being pushed by in the games

television advertisements. In an advertisement that was released in the early 1980s, there is a game of Dungeons and Dragons being played that is cut with animated scenes of the game and how it is being imagined.⁸² The commercial ends with the quote “It’s a product of your imagination”. The people that are casted as the players in this commercial follow the same pattern as those in previously discussed media.

All of the players that were casted in this commercial were also white. The gender stratification is what truly varied from the other works of media. Of the five players that were depicted, two of them were female while the other three were male.⁸³ While this is not completely unexpected because there were female depictions of Dungeons and Dragons players in *Mazes and Monsters*, it is clear that women were in the minority. Knowing this allows the perspective of who the public, and those who were worried about the potentially harmful forces of Dungeons and Dragons, wanted to protect. Young, white, nerds or loners had been the target of the anti-Dungeons and Dragons panic that spanned into the 1990s. Young, white, nerdy boys, however, were the primary focus of this concern based on the images that are shown of those who are at threat. The idea that the game was a threat at all faded going into the 1990s, and Dungeons and Dragons seemed to almost fade away with it.

Despite the media attention that Dungeons and Dragons got throughout the 1980s, the game seemed to lose popularity in the 1990s. This is likely in part due to the accusations of Satanism that lingered from the 1980s. However, this is also in part due to financial struggles that TSR faced in the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s. In the

⁸² “TSR Dungeons & Dragons Commercial 1980’s.” YouTube, April 1, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRLvncSSL8k>.

⁸³ “TSR Dungeons & Dragons Commercial 1980’s.”

1990s, two of TSR's owners sold their shares to Lorraine Williams. Despite there being conflicting accounts about Williams' time as owner of the company, she did manage to rebuild a significant portion of TSR and release several new Dungeons and Dragons settings, such as Tales of the Forgotten Realms in 1987, Spelljammer in 1989, and Ravenloft in 1990. These settings have become popular staples of the Dungeons and Dragons community as they have been reworked to fit each new version of the game. During this time, TSR also released Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: Second Edition. Ultimately, TSR was still not able to recover and Williams sold the company to Wizards of the Coast in April of 1997.⁸⁴

The 1990s saw an overall decline in Dungeons and Dragons being involved with popular culture. This is likely a byproduct of the outrage that the game saw in the 1980s. Despite the game's growing popularity throughout the prior decade, the larger public media stopped focusing on the game as the national headlines surrounding the game began to fizzle out. While this clearly did not lead to the game's overall demise, many of those who played Dungeons and Dragons report that it was difficult to find people who wanted to play in the 1990s because there was still the fear and connection with the occult with the game. However, that did not stop the game's fans altogether. After Wizards of the Coast's acquisition of the game in 1997, the game slowly began its resurgence into pop culture and the mainstream TTRPG world.

⁸⁴ Janelle Brown, "Disaffected Fans Cheer D&D Buyout", WIRED, April 10, 1997, <https://www.wired.com/1997/04/disaffected-fans-cheer-dd-buyout/>

Y2K: 2000-2009

The 2000s were a decade marked by the rise of online social spaces and an explosion of subcultures as the internet allowed for a greater number of interconnected communities from across the world. At the same time that the world was becoming increasingly more interconnected, the new company over Dungeons and Dragons, the Wizards of the Coast, released a new edition of Dungeons and Dragons. In 2000, a new Dungeons and Dragons system was released following the same numbering pattern that TSR was following.⁸⁵ The third edition of Dungeons and Dragons removed several of the prior restrictions from the games before it, which allowed for a more diverse combination of race and class combinations that can still be seen in the games today.⁸⁶ The new edition also introduced the game mechanic that the game is known for today: the d20.⁸⁷ This era also saw a new rise in Dungeons and Dragons being used in popular media.

The television show *Freaks and Geeks* aired from 1999 to 2000 for one season and the final episode, titled *Discos and Dragons*. In this episode, Daniel is forced to join

⁸⁵ Olivia Kennedy, "Dungeons & Dragons Edition Differences," Dicebreaker, October 1, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/series/dungeons-and-dragons/how-to/dnd-edition-differences#:~:text=Dungeons%20%26%20Dragons%203E,-The%20birth%20of&text=At%20this%20point%2C%20Wizards%20decided,new%20system%3A%20the%20d20%20system.>

⁸⁶ Kennedy, "Dungeons & Dragons Edition Differences"

⁸⁷ Kennedy, "Dungeons & Dragons Edition Differences"

the Audio/Visual club after trying to pull the fire alarm in the middle of an exam.⁸⁸ The club consists almost entirely of the Geeks in the show. Daniel gets made fun of by his peers because he goes to show a movie in one of the classrooms.⁸⁹ Throughout the episode, the geeks discuss the Dungeons and Dragons game that they are going to start while referencing the new handbook, *Deities and Demigods*.⁹⁰ This book was an actual Dungeons and Dragons supplemental handbook that was published December of 1980, and later retitled *Legends & Lore* in the 1985 printing.⁹¹ ⁹² The Audio/Visual club invites Daniel to join their game of Dungeons and Dragons.⁹³ They go through an explanation of what Dungeons and Dragons is with Daniel before they begin playing the game.⁹⁴ By the time the cut scene with the Dungeons and Dragons scene rolls around, Daniel is genuinely enjoying himself with the other members of the A/V Club.⁹⁵ The Dungeons and Dragons scene ends with the A/V group questioning whether Daniel playing with them means that he is turning into a geek or if they are turning into cool guys.⁹⁶

This show itself is a celebration of nerdism and what it means to be a member of geek subculture. The whole show focuses on a group of outcasts who are working to function in the environment that they have been in. Despite only running for one season,

⁸⁸ *Freaks and Geeks*, season 1, episode 18, “Discos and Dragons,” directed by Paul Feig, written by Paul Feig, featuring James Franco, John Francis Daley, Linda Cardellini, Samm Levine, Seth Rogan, Jason Segal, and Martin Starr. Aired July 8, 2000 on NBC.

⁸⁹ *Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

⁹⁰ *Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

⁹¹ Robert J. Kuntz and Lawrence Schick, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Deities & Demigods Cyclopedia: Special Reference Work* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1980).

⁹² James M. Ward et al., *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Legends & Lore* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, 1984).

⁹³ *Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

⁹⁴ *Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

⁹⁵ *Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

⁹⁶ *Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

Freaks and Geeks has amassed a cult following since its cancellation. In this show, there are ample representations of the “geeky” stereotypes that were prominent at the time. However, there are several interesting factors that come into play as shows move further from the 1980s.

As shows become further removed from the 1980s, the shows begin to focus more and more on the 1980s itself. Though this is the first of the visual media being analyzed, it is a continual trend that is seen throughout the next several decades. As *Dungeons and Dragons* makes a return into the mainstream again, most of the visual media that represents it is based out of the early 1980s. *Freaks and Geeks* was set in 1980-1981 school year, which means that the casting directors were both trying to play at the 1990s and early 2000s stereotype of what a nerd was, but also calling back to the 1980s and what stereotypes were prominent at the time.⁹⁷ This calls through heavily in the show and through its casting.

All of the proclaimed geeks in the show have a highly stereotypical look towards them. The geeks in the show consist of John Francis Daley as Sam Weir, Samm Levine as Neal Schweiber, and Martin Starr as Bill Haverchuck. These three are the main “geeks” featured in the show; however, there were more in the final episode that followed the same nerdy archetype of the others. All of these boys were white and the youngest of the group, with all of them being freshman as opposed to older students like the rest of the characters in the show.⁹⁸ They all fit into a nerd stereotype, with all of them experiencing various levels of social ineptitude, lack of clothing that matched the style of

⁹⁷ “Freaks and Geeks,” IMDb, September 25, 1999, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0193676/>.

⁹⁸ Contributors to *Freaks and Geeks* Wiki, “Geeks,” *Freaks and Geeks* Wiki, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://freaksandgeeks.fandom.com/wiki/Geeks>.

the time, and all of them sharing an unpopular interest in the Audio/Visual club.⁹⁹ These are the main characters of the show, and the ones that Daniel, one of the freaks, play Dungeons and Dragons with in the final episode of the show.

The stereotype of what a Dungeons and Dragons player has stayed relatively consistent throughout the last several decades. All of these main characters are white, young, scrawny, outcasted boys. All of them are what would be expected for a show to depict as a nerd, especially one that is attempting to emulate the 1980s and the people who played Dungeons and Dragons at the time. However, this show also speaks volumes about how perceptions of Dungeons and Dragons are shifting in regards to the game. Despite this show's setting being placed in the early 1980s, there is no hesitation about playing Dungeons and Dragons. Throughout the episode, there are no negative attitudes towards the game. Instead, this show doesn't mention anything positive or negative about the game. This is a signifier that the overall attitudes about the game are changing.

In *Freaks and Geeks*, Dungeons and Dragons is not shown as something that is corruptive or something that should be feared. Instead, the game is almost celebrated as something that can bring people together and bring them towards a common ground. In the beginning of the episode, Daniel is told to be a member of the A/V club as punishment for trying to get out of an exam.¹⁰⁰ In response to his lack of enthusiasm, the Dungeon Master of the game, named Harris, invites Daniel to join as they begin playing a new game.¹⁰¹ By the end of the game, Daniel asks if he can play another game with the group the next day, and the geeks of the show ponder whether this means that they are

⁹⁹ *Freaks and Geeks*, "Discos and Dragons"

¹⁰⁰ *Freaks and Geeks*, "Discos and Dragons"

¹⁰¹ *Freaks and Geeks*, "Discos and Dragons"

cool or they are making the cool kid a geek.¹⁰² The only sense of potential “corruption” mentioned in the episode is the potential that the geeks are turning cool or vice versa.

The lack of anything negative showcases the understanding that Dungeons and Dragons is not something that is dangerous. This also gives the understanding that, while there are a certain demographic of people that play the game, they might not need to be protected. There are no parents warning their children against the game, none of the characters mention that their parents said they should not play the game, and importantly, none of them seem wary of the game. Knowing this, it is clear that there has been a fundamental attitude shift away from the attitudes that were prominent in the 1980s. Instead, there is a celebratory element to the game that allows for those who do enjoy the game to connect through the characters and the stories that are told. *Freaks and Geeks* shines a positive light on Dungeons and Dragons, but it is far from the only piece of media that addressed the game over its run.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer ran from March of 1997 until May of 2003 on the WB Network. *Buffy* was a fantasy show centered around a vampire slayer named Buffy Summers, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar who has to save both her town of Sunnydale, California and the world. This show is not one that focuses specifically on Dungeons and Dragons; however, there is a scene of the game in the final episode of the show. In this scene, Rupert Giles, played by Anthony Head, was playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons with Andrew (played by Tom Lenk), Xander (played by Nicholas Brendon), and a potential slayer named Amanda (played by Sarah Hagan).¹⁰³ Much like the Dungeons

¹⁰²*Freaks and Geeks*, “Discos and Dragons”

¹⁰³*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 7, episode 22, “Chosen,” directed by Josh Whedon, aired May 20, 2003, on UPN.

and Dragons reference in E.T, the appearance of the game is not directly mentioned and it is not a long or pivotal scene for the episode. Regardless, this scene allows for a further insight into how Dungeons and Dragons players were being viewed during the mid-to-late-2000s.

In this scene, one of the fellow players explains the map to Rupert before he states what his character is going to do.¹⁰⁴ After making this decision, he comes across Trogdor the Burninator and a battle scene is initiated. From here, Rupert is seen rolling a d20 and he loses five hit points to the monster.¹⁰⁵ After this, Amanda locks the Burninator in a ‘Time Flux’.¹⁰⁶ As the DM starts to get upset at this action, Amanda explains that she is a level nine sorcerous and she has an item called the Emerald Chalice that allows her to do so.¹⁰⁷ Rupert laments his position in the game before there is a slowpan to Buffy asleep at the table before the show cuts to the next scene.¹⁰⁸ Notably, this episode never directly mentions Dungeons and Dragons.

What makes this scene distinctly “Dungeons and Dragons”? Without them saying the name, there is no definite way to fully determine that they are playing Dungeons and Dragons and not a similar TTRPG. Despite this, there are some clear clues. The final episode of season seven aired in May of 2003. This was just three years after the release of Dungeons and Dragons Third Edition, which as mentioned previously established the d20 system that is now a staple of many TTRPGs, but especially for Dungeons and

¹⁰⁴ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Chosen”

¹⁰⁵ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Chosen”

¹⁰⁶ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Chosen”

¹⁰⁷ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Chosen”

¹⁰⁸ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “Chosen”

Dragons.¹⁰⁹ This was also released just before the release of 3.5 edition, which came out in July of the same year. The d20 is not the only indication that this was Dungeons and Dragons. The Game Master is seen wearing a cloak, covering his head as he narrates the game. While this is not exclusive to Dungeons and Dragons players, it is seen in a later analysis that it is a common theme amongst the stereotypes for Dungeons and Dragons players. The monster that Rupert stumbles upon after opening a door, called Trogdor the Burninator, is not a monster listed in any of the Dungeon Master manuals; however, it could be a reference to the Strong Bad series that was released in 2001 and the episode that references the Dragon came out in January 2003.¹¹⁰ How is Dungeons and Dragons addressed in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and what stereotypes are the shows directors and producers pushing about the game?

Anthony Head, Tom Lenk, Nicholas Brendon, and Sarah Hagan were all playing Dungeons and Dragons at the table during this scene. In this scene, the only character that follows a similar stereotype to the characters in *Freaks and Geeks* is the DM, who is dressed in a wizard's cloak. Outside of this, all of the characters are dressed in relatively normal attire. None of these characters stand out as the typical nerd stereotype. In the show, Amanda states that she is bullied and that she is a weird kid; however, little is known about her outside of these interactions.¹¹¹ It could be presumed that Amanda is the stereotypical Dungeons and Dragons player to some extent, but without additional information, it is difficult to determine. Outside of these two, the other characters do not

¹⁰⁹ Kennedy, "Dungeons & Dragons Edition Differences."

¹¹⁰ Homestarrunnerdotcom, "Strong Bad Email #58 - Dragon", Youtube Video, 3:29, March 31, 2009, <https://youtu.be/90X5NJleYJQ>

¹¹¹ *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Season 7, episode 4, "Help." Directed by Rick Rosenthal, aired on October 15, 2002, on UPN

fit the classic stereotypes that have been seen thus far. There are several factors that might contribute to this.

Buffy is the first show in this section of analysis that does not cover the 1980s. This show is set from 1996 until 2003 unlike *Freaks and Geeks*, which came out later but was attempting to recreate the 1980s. This difference in setting allows for a fundamentally different understanding of what a Dungeons and Dragons player is. While *Freaks and Geeks* might have been trying to replicate the 1980s while adding a distinctly late 1990s to early 2000s relatability to the show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* did not have this nostalgia meets modern issue. They could use the thoughts and the stereotypes that existed in the present day without worrying that it would take viewers too far out of the story. Instead, the writers can use the stereotypes that they see around them to create these players. How do the characters in *Buffy* differ from the ones that have been seen in prior works?

The characters that are pictured playing Dungeons and Dragons in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are all of varying ages and genders. This is not something that has been seen before in any of the works that have been analyzed. The majority of the players are young high school males, with the exceptions being Giles, who is an older man, and Amanda, who is a high schooler but she is a female. As seen before in *Mazes and Monsters*, gender is not the biggest predictor of what is a Dungeons and Dragons player; however, as the years have progressed since the release of that movie, there have been less females portrayed as these players in comparison to males. This could have some relation back to the 1980s and the Satanic Panic. The ideas surrounding who needs to be protected, while not being explicitly applied in this context, are still affecting how many

see Dungeons and Dragons players through to the 2000s. Those who are associated with the game are also the ones who society deemed as needing protection while the Satanic Panic was at its peak. The association of protecting white young boys could be continuing throughout these films and shows, even if the idea of protecting them is no longer the prominent thought in people's minds.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer allows for a better understanding about how the perceptions of Dungeons and Dragons has changed since the 1980s. The game is not depicted as something dangerous or something that should be feared. In the context of the episode, this game of Dungeons and Dragons takes place just before the final battle. Instead of the game being something that is a focal point of the final episode and something that is considered dangerous, it instead works as a form of comedic relief. The scene is not something that is made to be taken seriously in context of the episode. It showcases Buffy, the main character, sleeping before the final battle, which is the pressing threat in both the episode and the season as a whole. The further time moves away from the Satanic Panic, the less the threat of being stuck in the game is apparent in the media. Buffy's portrayal of Dungeons and Dragons is on line for the other shows of the decade, including the Sarah Silverman Program.

The Sarah Silverman Program ran from 2007 to 2010 on Comedy Central. This show revolves around a young woman named Sarah Silverman, played by the actress of the same name, and her friends who live in Valley Village, California.¹¹² The show

¹¹² “The Sarah Silverman Program.’ A Slip Slope Plot Summary,” IMDb, February 18, 2010, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1578552/>.

tackled many difficult issues in its three year run before it was eventually canceled.¹¹³ In the second season of the show, Sarah's gay neighbors, Brian and Steven are supposed to be going on a date before the date gets disrupted by an unintentional Dungeons and Dragons game.¹¹⁴ The game was a misunderstanding as Steven wrote D.D. on the calendar and Brian misinterpreted the marking as Dungeons and Dragons.¹¹⁵ After the confrontation, Brian is insistent that the game must go on because he is the Dungeon Master.¹¹⁶ The game continues on through the day into the next day.¹¹⁷ This leads to a disagreement before the game is interrupted by Sarah, who needs help stopping an anti-abortion group from bombing the clinic.¹¹⁸ The Dungeons and Dragons group decides to be heroes and help her.¹¹⁹

The Sarah Silverman program does not have a set time period; however, it can be assumed that the show is set around the same period that it came out. This is critical because it allows for a more time period appropriate understanding of the stereotypes surrounding Dungeons and Dragons players at the time and gives insight into feelings about Dungeons and Dragons by the end of the decade. The Sarah Silverman episode speaks mostly on the topic of abortion, but it does allow insight into how Dungeons and Dragons players are viewed in a comedic sense. The genre of this show is also critical to

¹¹³ Trevor Kimball, "The Sarah Silverman Program: TV Show Canceled; No Season Four," canceled + renewed TV shows, ratings - TV Series Finale, May 12, 2010, <https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/sarah-silverman-program-canceled-14887/>.

¹¹⁴ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, season 2, episode 1, "Bored of the Rings", directed by Rob Schrab, written by Sarah Silverman, Rob Schrab, and Dan Sterling, featuring Sarah Silverman, Laura Silverman, Brian Posehn, and Steve Agee, aired October 3, 2007, on Comedy Central.

¹¹⁵ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, "Bored of the Rings."

¹¹⁶ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, "Bored of the Rings."

¹¹⁷ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, "Bored of the Rings."

¹¹⁸ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, "Bored of the Rings."

¹¹⁹ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, "Bored of the Rings."

keep in mind throughout the analysis. While the show does speak to important issues at the time, it is also mocking aspects of each of these issues.

The people who play Dungeons and Dragons fit into the adult nerd stereotype that becomes more associated with Dungeons and Dragons as time moves away from the 1980s. At this time, Dungeons and Dragons has not been a major feature of popular culture since the 1980s. Because of this, the people who are viewed as the nerds who play the game have also grown up since the 1980s. As such, all of the characters in the Sarah Silverman program who are playing the game are older than the ages that have been seen in prior works of media, with all of them being in their forties. Each person arrives at the apartment in their Dungeons and Dragons regalia, dressed as their character class.¹²⁰ This image is one that is heavily associated with being a nerd, especially at the end of the decade. Dungeons and Dragons at this point has progressed from being a game that is played by unassuming children who are in danger to losers who play the same game in their apartments for twenty years.

There are several similarities between the players in the Freaks and Geeks, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and The Sarah Silverman program. Among all of these shows, the characters playing the game are outcasts. In Freaks and Geeks, that is essentially the entire cast; however, in Buffy the Vampire Slayer there are statements earlier in the show that showcase the characters are outcast. This can also be seen in the Sarah Silverman Program. Even if the information about most of the characters at the table is relatively unknown, the dialogue in the episode points towards the game outcasting Brian. In the episode, Steve tells the group, “There is nothing heroic about sitting on your asses,

¹²⁰ *The Sarah Silverman Program*, “Bored of the Rings.”

playing a game for twelve year olds.” This quote, while potentially unintentional, does work to create a sense of othering towards the group at the table. This type of othering is not seen in the other shows, but the ideas surrounding Dungeons and Dragons othering groups is consistent throughout all of the works that have been analyzed.

The attitude surrounding the game is clearly shifting in this decade. The attitude about Dungeons and Dragons is not something that should be feared, something that could come to life and harm someone, or something that could lead the youth into dangerous situations. As the media gets further away from the 1980s, it becomes clear that this attitude is moving away. In the 2000s, there was no longer the thought that children could get stuck in the game like there was in the 1990s with Jumanji. Even with Jumanji being a comedy, it was based on the fears of the past, and that fear seems to be fading rapidly as time progresses. Even still, the ideas about who is at risk are still seen in who plays these characters in these works.

Consistently throughout these works, the Dungeons and Dragons players are white. This aspect allows for an understanding of not only the visual media, but who is actually playing Dungeons and Dragons, and most importantly, who is being threatened by the game in the Satanic Panic. The media suggests that, throughout the thirty year period, white people, especially young white men, are the people who have been protected by society. This is seen consistently in the casting of Dungeons and Dragons players. While there have been three females, the overwhelming majority of these actors are white males. Also notably, none of the actors cast up to this decade have been people of color. All of the actors that portray the Dungeons and Dragons players in these works

are white, which showcases the stereotypes surrounding Dungeons and Dragons players and the ideas that surround the game.

The early 2000s saw a resurgence in Dungeons and Dragons being used in media, whether that be as a point of comedy or as a major plot device. Dungeons and Dragons has managed to work its way back into popular culture, and this is in no small part because of the game's rebranding and a broader access to the internet allowing others to bond over a game that they might not otherwise be able to. The 2000s allowed for a broader revival of Dungeons and Dragons that allowed for later shows to capitalize on the entire game instead of only using the game as a one off. In the 2010s, Dungeons and Dragons spread its metaphorical wings in the media, allowing for a more robust portrayal of both the game and its players.

A New Era: 2010-2019

The 2010s saw a major shift in how Dungeons and Dragons was used in the media. From the beginning of the 2000s to the end of the 2010s, Dungeons and Dragons went from being a game that was greatly fading to one that became the centerpiece of a major television franchise. However, it did not start this way, and it took time to come to a point where this was the case. While there are many representations of Dungeons and Dragons in 2010s media, the two most prominent are the Big Bang Theory, a show that focused on nerd culture, and Strange Things, a show that uses Dungeons and Dragons from the 1980s and its monsters to create a fantasy setting with the game coming to life. Both of these shows will be analyzed to understand the most recent thoughts and feelings surrounding the game.

The Big Bang Theory was a show that ran from late 2007 until 2019, with 12 seasons total. This show is a sitcom that focused on four men who followed a similar stereotype to that of the classic nerd. In this show, Leonard, Sheldon, Howard, and Raj play Dungeons and Dragons on several occasions. There are 5 episodes in total that feature Dungeons and Dragons; however, only four of these five will be analyzed because the first, season five episode four, focuses more on a plot line surrounding sign language than it does the use of Dungeons and Dragons. This leaves four episodes for analysis.

The first of these episodes is in season six, which aired from 2012 to 2013. Episode eleven is the first of the season to mention Dungeons and Dragons. In this episode, Sheldon, Raj, Howard, Leonard, and Kevin play a holiday game of Dungeons and Dragons. Throughout this game, Sheldon is talking about how much he dislikes Christmas while the group works through their quest to save Christmas.¹²¹ At the end of this game, instead of saving Christmas, Sheldon ends up attacking Santa because of his childhood trauma surrounding the holiday.¹²² This episode was a holiday special, airing on December 13, 2012.¹²³ Despite the nature of this episode pertaining mostly to holiday festivities, there are still many useful insights that the show can provide.

The four main characters of this show, Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj, are also all players in the Dungeons and Dragons game. How these characters appear and act can explain a lot about the stereotypes surrounding Dungeons and Dragons in this period. All of these characters are depicted as highly intellectual people who hold a variety of college level degrees. Of the main four, three of them hold PhDs in various scientific fields, with Howard being the only one to cap at a Masters Degree. While having a high level of education is not what constitutes playing Dungeons and Dragons, it appears to be one factor that makes this group more apt to playing the game. The group's background in science constitutes them as prime people to play the game. However, the makeup of the group is drastically different from what has been seen in prior works.

¹²¹ *The Big Bang Theory*, season 6, episode 11, "The Santa Simulation." Directed by Mark Cendrowski, aired December 12, 2012, on CBS.

¹²² *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Santa Simulation."

¹²³ *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Santa Simulation."

The racial makeup of this group varies significantly from what has been seen prior to this. Leonard and Sheldon are both white Americans in the show, Howard is very openly ethnically Jewish, and Raj is Indian. This is the first sense of any representation that has been presented surrounding Dungeons and Dragons players. While this could be that the stereotypes surrounding Dungeons and Dragons are changing, it is likely because these roles were casted long before the writers of the show planned to use Dungeons and Dragons as a plot device. Despite this, the use of Dungeons and Dragons still points towards an aspect of these characters that would relate to those that are playing the game in the decade.

The next episode that features Dungeons and Dragons is also in season six. Episode twenty three features Dungeons and Dragons; however, this episode features the main group's girlfriends after their trip to Las Vegas falls through.¹²⁴ The original plan was for Sheldon, Howard, Leonard, and Raj to play the game together but once Penny, Bernadette, and Amy return from the airport, their plans change.¹²⁵ This episode is important in its premiere and understanding because it is the first substantial inclusion of women in the Dungeons and Dragons narrative.

Notably, within this episode, there is not an open acceptance of the women playing Dungeons and Dragons with them. The women in this episode are here by mistake after their trip to Las Vegas does not go to plan. In fact, once the women arrive in the apartment, there is immense resistance towards them joining the game. This could point towards a belief that women cannot or should not play Dungeons and Dragons.

¹²⁴ *The Big Bang Theory*, season 6, episode 23, "The Love Spell Potential." Directed by Anthony Rich, aired May 9, 2013, on CBS.

¹²⁵ *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Love Spell Potential."

However, the makeup of this group is similar to that of the male group. Bernadette has a PhD in microbiology and Amy has a PhD in neurobiology. Penny is the only one of the entire group who does not have any college level education. It is mentioned that she briefly went to community college, but outside of that she has the least amount of higher education. She is also consistently the one that is the least interested in the game of Dungeons and Dragons. One of the major reasons the group gets her to play is because she got to roll dice like she would have in Las Vegas.

The women in this show do more to subvert the traditional nerd stereotype than the men. The looks of the women are all different and very distinct. The one who aligns the closest with the traditional stereotype of a female nerd is Amy, who dresses conservatively, hides her body, wears neutrals and browns, and she has an awkward personality. All of these aspects tie into what is typically considered a female nerd. Bernadette both falls into and subverts this stereotype. She wears revealing clothing that would not typically be associated with a nerd. However, she has a quiet personality. Instead of being bold, like Penny, Bernadette is quiet and shy. Penny is the subversion of the nerd stereotype. She is loud and loves to go out and party. Her clothes are more revealing than the other two, and they fit into the style of the time. This is not the only time that Dungeons and Dragons is included in the show.

After season six, Dungeons and Dragons falls away until it returns again in season nine, episode twenty two. In this episode, a majority of the characters go to a wine tasting, however; they leave behind Sheldon and Bernadette because Sheldon does not

like to drink and Bernadette can not partake because she is pregnant.¹²⁶ In lieu of going to a wine tasting, the two play a game of Dungeons and Dragons, with Sheldon as the Dungeons Master.¹²⁷ In their game, Bernadette is free to do all of the things that she cannot do while she is pregnant.¹²⁸ The Dungeons and Dragons plotline is not the prominent one in this episode, but understanding how this episode used Dungeons and Dragons is critical to understanding how perceptions surrounding the game have changed since the Satanic Panic.

In this episode, Dungeons and Dragons is not demonized. Instead, Sheldon as the Dungeon Master turns the game into an escape for Bernadette. In the game, she can use her character to escape the woes that she has been feeling over the duration of her pregnancy. The portrayal of the game in this episode showcases how much attitudes have changed surrounding the game. It is not something to be feared or mocked at this point in history. Instead, it is a respite for people who are looking for experiences that they might not be able to have. It can offer fun and relief. Dungeons and Dragons is showcased as an outlet for these emotions. It allows the players to work through some of these things while connecting with others and having fun. This episode is an example of the decade. It allows for an in depth understanding about the game's core instead of the fear that surrounds the game. This is not the last episode of the show that features Dungeons and Dragons.

¹²⁶ *The Big Bang Theory*, season 9, episode 22, "The Fermentation Bifurcation." Directed by Nikki Lorre, aired April 28, 2016, on CBS.

¹²⁷ *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Fermentation Bifurcation"

¹²⁸ *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Fermentation Bifurcation"

The last episode that includes Dungeons and Dragons is in season twelve. Episode sixteen follows Raj, Howard, Kevin, Leonard, and Sheldon as they attempt to join a celebrity game of Dungeons and Dragons, with guest star Wil Wheaton as the Dungeon Master.¹²⁹ This episode focuses almost exclusively on Dungeons and Dragons and allows for a fuller understanding of how perceptions surrounding Dungeons and Dragons have changed since the decade prior and even more so the Satanic Panic in the 1980s.

Wil Wheaton is an actor and writer who was in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. He is also an avid Dungeons and Dragons player. Within the TTRPG community, there is a “Wil Wheaton Dice Curse” which would denote that a player rolls a statistically significant number of critical failures. Including him in this episode is not only a great way for those who do not partake in Dungeons and Dragons to recognize a name, but also a great way to call out to the TTRPG community and get them excited about the show in its final season. *The Big Bang Theory* was also not an underground show. This was seen by many fans across the United States. While the average person might not understand Wheaton’s connection to Dungeons and Dragons, it still is a move forward that signals the game is no longer something that needs to be feared.

The Big Bang Theory allows for analysis of stereotypes in the decade itself; however, there is a major show that revolves around the world of Dungeons and Dragons that is set in the 1980s. Similar to *Freaks and Geeks*, *Stranger Things* focuses on a group of high school aged children. This is where the similarities end. In *Stranger Things*, the entire plot centers around Dungeons and Dragons. From the first episode to the most

¹²⁹ *The Big Bang Theory*, season 12, episode 16, “The D&D Vortex.” Directed by Mark Cendrowski, aired on February 21, 2019, on CBS.

recent season, every aspect of this show is a Dungeons and Dragons reference. How is Dungeons and Dragons used in the show, who plays the Dungeons and Dragons players, and what does this say about the retroactive stereotypes being applied to the 1980s?

Stranger Things is a television show that was released on Netflix in 2016. This series follows a primary cast of four middle school boys as they uncover the secret world that surrounds their hometown of Hawkins, Indiana. The four main boys in this series are Will Byers (Noah Schnapp), Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard), Dustin Henderson (Gaten Matarazzo), and Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin). These characters are followed by a dynamic side cast, none of which are involved with the Dungeons and Dragons scene until the fourth season. In this season, there are several characters introduced that play the game because the boys start high school. As a part of this, there is a greater exploration of Dungeons and Dragons at the time and its correlation with the Satanic Panic.

While there are several characters who play Dungeons and Dragons in the second season, the main leader of the players is Eddie Munson, who is played by Joseph Quinn. Eddie is the rock and roll loving, Dungeons and Dragons playing, drug dealing kid that was mythicized as being dangerous in the 1980s.¹³⁰ Eddie Munson wears leather jackets, and his black hair is permed and allowed to be wild. Just his clothing is indicative of the rock and roll scene that was demonized at the time. This is not the only aspect of Eddie that aligns with the parental fears of the 1980s. Eddie's personality was centered around anti-conformity. In a quote from the show, he states: "It's forced conformity, that's what's killing the kids."¹³¹ This quote encompasses Munson's character arc throughout

¹³⁰ *Stranger Things*, season 4, episode 1, "Chapter One: The Hellfire Club." Directed by Matt and Ross Duffer, aired on May 27, 2022, on Netflix.

¹³¹ *Stranger Things*, "Chapter One: The Hellfire Club."

the show, and shows why so many parents might have been concerned about children like Eddie Munson.

Eddie Munson is the standout character for the fears of the Satanic Panic. Throughout his storyline, Eddie is blamed for killing two students of the high school. One of these, which leads to his eventual disappearance, is the death of Chrissy, a cheerleader who was looking to purchase illicit substances from Munson. She had been experiencing hallucinogenic symptoms before soliciting with Eddie, but had not mentioned them. After her body was found in his trailer, he was blamed for the unnatural death and, because of his affiliation with both Dungeons and Dragons and his refusal to conform to societal expectations, felt as though he needed to go into hiding. This is where Munson remains for the next four episodes of the season. His story, however, ties more into the greater Satanic Panic world.

Munson becomes the direct target of both threats and actual mob-like pursuit throughout the course of the series. While in hiding, Chrissy's boyfriend attempts to find the person who he believes killed his girlfriend. His pursuit leads him in a feverous search of where Eddie might be hiding, and through the process makes several attributions of Munson that are all the more telling about the perceptions of Dungeons and Dragons players throughout the 1980s and how these perceptions are remembered. In episode two of the series, he states that Dungeons and Dragons has the ability to warp the mind. He also says that Eddie is the wrong type of person and that his mind is getting caught in the game. These types of statements are not shocking when analyzing the beliefs surrounding Dungeons and Dragons during the Satanic Panic. As seen previously, these are all major talking points that were spawned surrounding the Satanic Panic and

how it had the potential to impact a child's life. This is not the only major event surrounding the game in the show.

Lucas Sinclair is one of the main characters of the show, and in the fourth season, Sinclair joins the basketball team in an attempt to reform his own social image. At the start of the show, it is stated that Lucas is both on the basketball team and a member of the Hellfire Club, the name of the Dungeons and Dragons club at Hawkins High School. However, in the first episode of the series, he has to choose between the championship basketball game or playing the campaign final for the Hellfire Club. He chooses the basketball game, which isolates him from the rest of his friends. In the show, Lucas denies being a member of Hellfire Club or being friends with the rest of the group while Chrissy's boyfriend is on a hunt for Eddie. While this could be in part an attempt to ensure he does not become a focus of the manhunt, it could also be a move to protect his own social status.

This does not mean that Lucas outright denies knowing anything about Dungeons and Dragons or that he is willing to associate Dungeons and Dragons with the allegations that were being thrown against it. There is one instance where, while the rest of the team is falsifying claims about Dungeons and Dragons, Lucas defends the game. However, when asked about whether or not he plays the game, he denied it. This is reason to suggest that there is a tie, both in memory and at the time, that Dungeons and Dragons is not something that would lead to a higher social status, which is what Lucas was searching for in the show. This association with undesirability is not uncommon and has been seen in almost every show before this. Dungeons and Dragons consistently is a show for those who are not of the same social status as their peers.

It is critical to be aware that *Stranger Things* is written and produced by the Duffer Brothers, who played *Dungeons and Dragons* in the 1980s. While the show is a work of science fiction, the general attitudes are based on their memories of the 1980s and what it was like growing up in the Satanic Panic. Being aware of this in the analysis is critical because of the biases that the Duffer Brothers and the writers of the show would be bringing to its writing. This show utilizes *Dungeons and Dragons* in a major way that has not been seen prior to this. The game is at the core of the show's plot. However, the show is not made in the same way that *Mazes and Monsters* was in the Satanic Panic. The messaging of these shows is critically different. While *Mazes and Monsters* attempted to criticize *Dungeons and Dragons* and create it to be the metaphorical villain of the Satanic Panic, *Stranger Things* is attempting to look back on the area in a more nuanced but also positive light.

The Duffer Brothers lived through the Satanic Panic, and as such, they bring a specific perspective to the *Dungeons and Dragons* Visual media realm that is unique in its openness. The Duffer Brothers are clear in their indication that they want *Stranger Things*, despite its tie to science fiction, to be a show that brings back both the nostalgia and the modern day revival of the game. This is clear through their continued use of the game throughout the series. The main cast are all seen playing *Dungeons and Dragons* in the pilot episode, and references to the game continue throughout the show. The first season focuses on Demogorgons and the finale hints at a larger threat at hand. The second and third seasons focus on another *Dungeons and Dragons* villain called the Mind Flayer, which takes control over Will Byers, who has consistently been the target of these villains. The most recent season, season four, focuses on one of the major villains in early

Dungeons and Dragons lore, called Vecna. The continued use of Dungeons and Dragons to create science fiction scenarios showcases a particular knowledge and understanding of the show, as well as a continued analysis of what it meant to be a Dungeons and Dragons player at the time and the situations that surround that.

Will Byers is another interesting case study for Dungeons and Dragons players in the show. Will Byers, played by Noah Schnapps, is the son of Joyce Byers, a single mom of two children who is struggling to keep up with her responsibilities as sole caretaker and income in the household. Will consistently becomes the target of these otherworldly creatures and is portrayed as being the weakest member of the group. He is also the only character in the main four that is canonically a homosexual. While this is slightly out of the span of the analysis, the consistent targeting of Will and his later reveal as being a gay man could tie to other issues that were going on in the 1980s, most notably being the HIV-AIDs epidemic. While this is not directly mentioned in the show, Will being at constant threat of an unseen and unknowing force could be a potential correlation to other issues that were occurring in the 1980s.

Stranger Things is a show that was created as a nostalgic piece, and as such it does have its own issues with the portrayal of stereotypes. The characters and who were casted into these roles were not done based on the stereotypes of the modern time, but instead were casted based on what the creators wanted to showcase about the Dungeons and Dragons community in the 1980s. All four boys are written to be socially isolated from the rest of their peers due to their hobbies. However, the actors in the show are not showcased as unattractive or repulsive by their peers. They do struggle to find romantic connections; however, this is not the herculean task that it appeared to be in previous

shows. Mike Wheeler finds a romantic interest in the child experiment Eleven, who the group aids in both finding out about herself and her abilities. Dustin finds a romantic interest in a fellow nerdy girl who he met at a camp, and Lucas Sinclair is seen having a romantic relationship with Max, another girl who is introduced in season 2. The only one of the four who is left without a significant other by the end of the fourth season is Will Byers.

The shows before the 2010s largely portrayed Dungeons and Dragons players as men who struggled with intimate and peer relationships outside of the game. They were the losers, the nerds, the outcasts, or a variety of other labels that would have distanced themselves from the social norm. In the 2010s, this has not completely changed. However, there is a fundamental attitude shift in how Dungeons and Dragons is perceived. The media has begun a drastic shift towards the celebration of the nerdy and Dungeons and Dragons as a whole. This was seen in *Freaks and Geeks* as well, but is especially true for the 2010s. There is no hiding that nerd-dom has ascended to a specific state where there is no longer a major portrayal of Dungeons and Dragons in a negative light, but instead something that deserves to be celebrated.

Conclusion

Visual media can be utilized to understand how a broader public audience understands and perceives groups of people. Throughout this essay, there has been an analysis of works that have ranged from the 1980s at the onset of the Satanic Panic to the 2010s with the release of *Stranger Things*. There is a broad spectrum of issues that could have been analyzed throughout these works; however, using these works to understand public perceptions of the nerd stereotype and what ideas were surrounding their gender presentation and sexuality aids in a better understanding of how media can shape perceptions of a subcultural group. By viewing the media and taking note of the character's sexuality and their presentation of masculinity, two clear traits about Dungeons and Dragons players, and later nerds at large, become clear.

The first of these is that nerds struggle with social connections. Specifically, nerds constantly struggle with making and maintaining romantic relationships. The few romantic relationships that are seen between nerds in each piece of media are either already pre-established or are used as a device to show some form of deviant sexuality. The second major trait that becomes clear is that being a nerd, especially one that plays Dungeons and Dragons, revolves around being a white man. There were few women or people of color seen throughout any piece of media that was utilized, and when these groups were used in the works, they were either used as a plot piece to showcase a deviant sexuality, such as in *Mazes and Monsters* and *the Big Bang Theory*, or they were

outside of the Dungeons and Dragons table. These two traits carry through each piece of media that was viewed for this project, and understanding these traits and the overall formation of this stereotype is critical when analyzing other subgroups like the nerd.

Each subcultural group has defining characteristics, whether they be self-assigned or otherwise. Understanding how a broader scope of people understand these characters can aid in creating a complex view of the discourse not only between sex and sexuality but also between the identity that the public perceives and the identity that a group identifies with. Identity is intrinsically intertwined with everything a person does in their life and it is tied into how they interact with the world around them. Watching visual media and viewing with a critical eye can showcase where some of these categories break down and allow for a better understanding of the complexity of identity. Dungeons and Dragons can act as a symbol of escape, but its use in visual media allows for a broader group to learn about the game, potentially understand the game, or make their own assumptions about who a Dungeons and Dragons player is.

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